

# Cranberry crunch time



A jar of dried cranberries from the Decas plant is ready for sale in Taiwan.

## Bogs and processing plants buzzing with activity during 6-week harvest

By TAMARA RACE  
The Patriot Ledger

**T**he smell of sugared cranberries hangs heavy in the warm moist air inside the Decas Cranberry Processing Plant in Carver.

Stacks of huge juice-stained crates filled with frozen berries line the walls.

A dozen one-ton bags of sugar, enough for a few days work, rest on pallets waiting to be mixed into huge vats of syrup.

Six women wearing blue uniforms, hair nets and surgical gloves stand at a conveyor belt breaking up clumps of frozen berries and picking out the rotten or unripe ones.

This is the season of the cranberry, Massachusetts' number one cash crop. Last year, the state's 14,200 acres of cranberry bogs produced 2.1 million barrels, worth an estimated \$143 million.

And at dozens of sites around the South Shore, October brings colorful scenes of the harvest, as millions of floating red berries are skimmed from flooded bogs.

But there's another side of the harvest seldom seen by the public: Inside a cranberry receiving plant, the October crunch means 20 truckloads a day, round-the-clock operations, ringing phones and humming

conveyor belts.

And, always, the smell of the berries.

Ethel LaVallee, who turns 80 in January, knows that side of the cranberry business: She's has been working the harvest for nearly 20 years. Two years ago she ditched her job sorting fresh fruit in Rochester to work in Decas' new Carver plant.

"I like it," she said. "You see something new every day. I'm the nosy type. I always want to know what's going on. I never could sit in a rocking chair. Never. I want to learn how to drive a forklift."

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LaVallee's energy and feisty disposition belies her age. She works full time on her feet alongside several much younger migrant women who speak little English. She moved back to Bourne, where she was raised, after living for many years in Wareham.

"It's not lonely," she said. "They (the migrant workers) are nice. While they talk to each other I'm usually thinking about a million different things. I like to see the different berries come in with their different names and varying sizes. It's a fun place to work."

Berries passing LaVallee's scrutiny are run through a giant slicing machine and fed by conveyor belt past one more human inspector into a series of enormous vats where a small percentage of their juice is extracted and replaced with a sugared syrup.

The berries travel through a number of drying chambers before they are misted with sunflower oil to prevent clumping and dropped by conveyor belt into 25 pound boxes lined with plastic ready for shipping.

The juice byproduct is evaporated to produce cranberry concentrate.

Dried cranberries and concentrate are just two possible end products for the millions of pounds of cranberries flowing into the receiving station next door.

Nearly 900 tractor-trailer trucks brimming with freshly picked berries will rumble through the receiving station during the six-week cranberry harvest, from mid-September to Halloween.

"It's exciting," Ken Medeiros of Freetown said. "The harvest is a pretty fast process. The trucks line up in the lot. Everyone is upbeat. The day goes by quickly. This is my first season working at the plant. There's never a slack moment."

Berries delivered in the morning will be on their way to freezers in New Bedford, Middleboro, Taunton, Worcester and Winterport, Maine, in less than 24 hours, said John Decas, the plant owner.

Large manufacturers make as much juice and concentrate as they can from fresh berries to avoid freezing costs, but the window of opportunity is so small the bulk of cranberry products is made from frozen berries, Decas said.

Mary Dunham, 41, of Carver has worked in the scale operations room for four seasons.

"It's hectic, fast-paced, but exciting," Dunham said. "The radios are going, the phones are ringing and the trucks are coming in. I love it. The people are tremendous. It's a six-week harvest, but I come in a week early and leave a week late. It helps pay the bills and gives us some Christmas money. The seasonal workers change every year, and you get to meet and train new people all the time."

Automation has reduced the once labor-intensive process of cleaning cranberries, at least those destined for freezer storage.

Cranberries dry-harvested for the fresh fruit market require more human attention.

Cranberries bound for processing plants are harvested by flooding bogs, beating the berries off the vines with machines, and collecting the floating berries into trucks.

The trucks dump the berries into pools at the receiving station, where water jets push the berries onto a conveyor belt for cleaning.

The berries are bounced onto a stainless steel bed covered with holes that allows the berries to fall through onto a slatted surface while collecting large pieces of debris.

Berries too small for market fall through the slats into bins for composting.

The process is repeated on another series of conveyor belts to remove smaller particles of debris. The berries are then rinsed with clean water, forced through brushes to remove any squashed berries, and fed into a giant hopper to be weighed and dropped into crates for shipping.

The crates are loaded into trucks and hauled away the same day.

Berries sold as fresh fruit are dry-harvested by a machine that knocks the berries off the vine into a sack at the rear of the device. Harvest workers dump the berries into crates and haul them to Decas' fresh-fruit receiving station in Rochester.

Workers there run the berries through vintage 1900s "bouncing board" equipment designed to separate quality berries from inferior and rotten berries.

"If they bounce onto the conveyor belt from the first four boards, they make the fresh-fruit grade," Decas said. "If they bounce off the last three boards, they're taken for processing. Those that don't bounce at all are composted."

The berries are run through a laser device that detects under-ripe fruit by its lack of color and eliminates them from the stream with a puff of air.

What the machine misses, workers pick out by hand, tediously inspecting a steady stream flowing by on a conveyor belt.

Berries passing inspection are immediately packaged and shipped.

Decas hires a few temporary workers during the peak season but runs his receiving station and processing plant with about 50 seasonal employees and a handful of year-round workers.

About the same number work at the fresh-fruit plant.

In the next few years, Decas intends to move the Rochester fresh-fruit operation and his Wareham offices to the Carver site, he said.

"I wanted to do it in time for the next harvest, but that's too quick," he said. "It will probably take two years."